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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000164

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS LEADERS DEMAND AMENDMENT OF RELIGION LAW

REF: MINSK 161

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) A group of local religious leaders led by the New Life Church launched a campaign to pressure the GOB to change Belarus' restrictive 2003 Religion Law. Leaders from various religious groups met with Ambassador to discuss their campaign plans. The following week, the group conducted a press conference to announce that they had successfully gathered 50,000 signatures to challenge the law and demand revisions, and held a roundtable discussion with human rights lawyers to discuss further strategies. Their petition was subsequently rejected by the Constitutional Court. Poloff visited the New Life Church to witness the hardships the church is suffering as a result of GOB harassment. End summary.

Leaders Demand Seven Changes to Regulations

2. (C) On February 20, Ambassador met a group of seven religious and civic leaders who discussed their plans for a petition campaign to pressure authorities to amend the 2003 Religion Law. In attendance were: Pavel Severinets, Alexey Shein, and Vitaliy Rymashevskiy of the opposition Belarusian Christian Democracy; Sergey Lukanin, Chief Counsel for New Life Church; Dmitriy Zalianetskiy, pastor's assistant with Jesus Christ Church; Vyacheslav Goncharenko, pastor of New Life Church and Bishop with the Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches; and pastor Gennady Kernazhytskiy.

3. (C) Lukanin described the group's efforts since April 2007 to collect 50,000 signatures for a petition to submit to Parliament, the Presidential Administration, and the Constitutional Court demanding revision of the law. In addition to the suggestion of the establishment of a governmental working group to discuss the matter with religious groups, the petition contains seven points that the group demands be amended. They are:

- to rescind registration requirements for religious groups;
- to end the requirement for permission from local authorities to establish places of worship;
- to eliminate administratively-imposed territorial boundaries in which religious groups are permitted to practice;
- to eliminate clauses that prohibit foreigners from acting as founders or leaders of religious groups;
- to return government-owned property formerly belonging to churches;
- to add a provision that forbids local authorities to restrict the activities of religious groups without official

court orders; and,
-- to revise the Mass Activities Law so that it does not
apply to religious services.

14. (C) Lukanin pointed out that about half of the signers of the petition did not consider themselves religious, but supported the petition because they understand that the Religion Law not only hinders religious practice, but violates rights to freedom of expression and assembly as well. He also noted that over half of those approached to sign the petition did so. Gathering signatures took longer than expected, he said, at least in part because the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church reportedly urged believers not to sign the document, saying the law helps maintain peace and stability among the various religious groups in Belarus.

15. (C) The leaders expressed hope for continued support from the U.S. and the EU, and floated the idea of sending a representative to the U.N. General Assembly to present their case there. They also stated that they are planning to establish a legal defense office for persecuted religious groups.

A Somewhat Consolidated Media Plan

16. (C) To support the petition, the group held a press conference at New Life Church February 28. They outlined the seven points they demand be revised, and discussed the difficulties they faced when collecting signatures. Poloff attended the press conference and noted that it was very well organized by local standards, and included most of the major independent media outlets.

MINSK 00000164 002 OF 002

17. (C) The following day, the group sponsored a round table discussion with civil rights lawyers and various opposition representatives to discuss the petition, possible future campaigns, and potential legal strategies. The round table was also well attended by opposition media.

Petition Denied

18. (C) The group submitted its petition February 26 to the Constitutional Court, which rejected it one week later. The court reasoned that it can only examine the constitutionality of a law at the request of the head of state or other government officials, not upon request by individuals. The group had planned to submit the petition to the Presidential Administration and Parliament also, but was stymied by complex regulations that require submitting organizations to register as political groups -- a condition nearly impossible to fulfill.

Church Runs on Home-Made Utilities

19. (C) As a follow-up to the February 20 meeting, Poloff visited New Life Church's facility on the outskirts of Minsk. It was clear that government restrictions and harassment have made operations difficult there. Since the Minsk City government has cut off all utility services to the church, administrators have had to create their own power and water supplies. Poloff observed the generator that is currently used to power the facility -- at a cost of almost USD 1,000 per month, according to Lukanin. Heat is provided by a furnace fueled by wood, sometimes provided by parishioners themselves. Water is supplied by an unauthorized borehole that church administrators were able to drill. Lukanin stated that in recent months, seven of his parishioners have been fired from their jobs as a result of "orders from authorities."

Comment

¶10. (C) As reported reftel, the regime is employing a range of methods to place pressure on religious activities. Though this campaign is unlikely to result in the desired changes to the Religion Law, the fact that various interested parties have coordinated their efforts into a single petition campaign is a positive step. With the press conference and round table event, the group was able to accompany the petition with something resembling a consolidated media plan.

These two points show that religious groups are able to put forth more coordinated, multi-pronged efforts than in the past. It is encouraging that religious leaders -- like entrepreneurs and other opposition and civil society activists -- have become more organized and capable of collective action in defense of their rights.

STEWART